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ABSTRACT

Eckerd College in Florida has instituted portfolio assessment in writing classes, a method which invites students to engage in learning on a variety of levels. Portfolios encourage students to consider the responses of various readers in their revision processes, claim ownership of their writing, review the papers they have written in college, decide which ones they think are best, and articulate their writing strengths. Students' annotations in their portfolios provide a rich illustration of student learning, offer examples of the intricate intersection between context and cognition, and demonstrate some of the meaningful rhetorical acts students construct in the process. Students' annotations demonstrate numerous cognitive tasks which are outside the province of standard assessment exams, such as a well-developed consideration of their readers and of the context in which their writing will be read, the development of a highly individualized philosophy of writing, and articulations of their learning. (Four questions for future research are attached.) (SR)

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VALUING WRITING: STUDENTS AND THEIR PORTFOLIOS

In addition to asking questions about what our assessment methods actually measure, questions currently plaguing educators in all disciplines, we need to be concerned about the messages our assessment methods convey to students. In New Methods in College Writing Programs (1986), Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff sum up succinctly some of the serious misconceptions about writing that timed proficiency exams reinforce:

> A proficiency test tells students that they can do their best writing (demonstrate their proficiency) with fifteen minutes of thought on some issue just sprung on them, followed by writing, followed (sometimes) by some cosmetic revising and copyediting. No drafts, no discussion of the issue with others, no trying our drafts on readers, no getting responses. Surely few of us ever write anything that matters to us in this fashion. But students who pass are encouraged to believe that they can write anything this way, and students who fail are encouraged to believe this is the process they need to learn. . . . The writing is unconnected to the study of any material and cut off from connection with any ongoing conversation. (97)

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In other words, the message such exams convey to students is that writing is a skill, not a complex cognitive process involving critical thinking and the construction of a writing subject. Imagine, then, the potential confusion of a student placed in a process-oriented writing class as the result of failing this type of proficiency exam. She could easily pass that course and still find herself unprepared to succeed on the exam.

In place of this superficial, decontextualized, exercise, Eckerd College has instituted portfolio assessment, a method which I will argue invites students to engage in learning on a variety of levels. Students are invited to extend their view of writing beyond the closure of "term papers," to see writing as involving recursive processes of critical thinking, expression, rethinking, and revision. The portfolio encourages students to consider the responses of various readers--the professor in the original course, a Writing Center peer consultant--in their revision processes. And what I believe most important, students are invited to claim ownership of their writing, to review the papers they have written in college, to decide which ones they think are best, and to articulate their writing strengths.

In thinking about what students gain from the portfolio process, I have found the students' annotations to provide the richest illustration of student learning. Our request

for annotations on the inside of our portfolio folder is stated very simply:

> Students must attach to the front of each piece a brief description of the circumstances of the writing (assignment, number of drafts, length of time spent on the writing, and resources used to complete the piece, including any help received from others). A note at the front of the portfolio should call the readers' attention to what the student believes are the strengths of the portfolio.

We phrased this assignment in general terms in hopes that students would respond individually, and they do. Annotations for the portfolio as a whole, the "note at the front," range in length from two lines to one and one half pages.

What we invite students to do in these annotations is to engage in a complex process of metacognition and metadiscourse. We invite them to engage in a type of learning that goes beyond anything they discovered while originally composing the papers they include in the portfolio. An important form of learning is evidenced in these annotations that cannot take place in standard assessment exams, that the very nature of timed proficiency exams prohibits.

As a portfolio reader, I did not realize, nor, I believe, did those who originally composed the annotation prompt, all that we invite students to do in these annotations. Not until I began studying the portfolios with an eye toward this paper and future research, did I begin to

map out the complex cognitive and rhetorical territory our students venture into in response to our simple context cue.

In fact, these annotations offer a good example of the intricate intersection between context and cognition that Linda Flower describes in a 1989 article in CCC, "Cognition, Context, and Theory-Building" (CCC 40: 282-311). Flower argues that meaningful rhetorical acts are the result of context and cognition constructing one another. For the rest of this paper, I wish to introduce to you some of Eckerd College's student voices as I describe some of the meaningful rhetorical acts they construct in their annotations.

The request for annotations invites students to mediate their writing in a variety of ways. Many of these students show a well-developed consideration of their readers. They have reflected upon the values of the audience that will evaluate their portfolios, and they have devised strategies to affect those readers. Some students address the readers directly. One annotation begins,

> Thank you for taking the time to review my Writing Portfolio. I hope that you will feel that your time has been well-spent; I love to write, and hope that you will be as excited about my work as I am.

Another student concludes his annotation with an exhortation to the audience:

> When writing, I always keep in mind my audience and I make every effort not to bore them with a mundane paper. With this in mind, read on and enjoy!

Other students incorporate into their annotations the values they assume their audience, an interdisciplinary faculty committee, holds about writing. One writes,

> My appreciation of writing has escalated during my years at Eckerd, as I have noticed through my study of history that the pen is mightier than the sword. I believe that it is essential for the educated individual to have the ability to share their ideas with others.

And a few, whose sense of audience is not, perhaps, quite so well developed, express uncertainty about the standards by which the portfolios will be evaluated. On such student writes,

> I Hope that this portfolio reflects the standards of Eckerd College.

In a related, and often more complicated rhetorical strategy, students are invited to situate their discourse. In a number of annotations, students seek to create the context in which they want their portfolio papers to be read. This sort of mediation is very complicated because the context and the readers of the portfolios differ--sometimes dramatically--from those of the original papers. To compensate, many students reproduce parts of the assignment that originally cued the paper. Here a student quotes from a sociology exam:

> I would like the evaluators to read questions three and four, which are paper clipped together. The questions asked were:
>
> 3. Discuss the major ideas of the Consensus, Conflict, and Interactionist Views on Crime.
>
> 4. Describe the nature of data that are provided

> in the Uniformed Crime Report and the National Crime Survey. Compare the two sources. Discuss the weaknesses of each survey.

Students also use the annotation to anticipate and answer questions readers might have about their papers:

> I still have some question as to whether my persuasive piece written about the philosophies of Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel would fit into the category described as a persuasive paper. In my own defense, even though my topic isn't contemporary, I presented material and argued for an idea that I believed. I hope no other questions about this folder arise and that my writing is considered competent.

Uneasy that their writing might be evaluated by readers unfamiliar with their particular fields of study, other students use the annotations to educate their readers as to the "proper" way of reading a certain paper. A psychology student writes:

> The essence of psychological writing is emotionless, humorless, and neutral in order that the facts presented can be judged on merit alone. In order to keep from boring your colleagues, it is permissible to be a little looser in introducing the subject and giving some background, but the general tone should be one of objective presentation.

And in a rhetorical move I find very interesting, a few students use the annotation to create a context in which a weak paper will not be judged too harshly. "The strong point of this portfolio," writes one student,

> is my essay critiquing Joseph Stalin. This, I feel, is one of my finest works at this school. My weakest is a freshman short-story for Western Heritage which made me blush as I read it.

Obviously, these student writers, and many of their peers I don't have time to quote, have given serious consideration to audience and context, and have analyzed their own writing as well as that of specific disciplines, all cognitive tasks outside the province of standard assessment exams.

The annotations also invite students to engage in discourse analysis, to reflect upon and articulate the strengths of their writing and to analyze and describe the processes they used in particular writing situations. I was pleased to discover that the students' analyses of their writing strengths is not a mere recitation of received values, but reflects the individuality of the students' writing. These annotations show students developing highly individualized philosophies of writing in response to the request that they "call the readers' attention to . . . the strengths of the portfolio." In this example, a student focuses on the level of word choice and sentence structure,

> My word choice and sentence structure reflects the value I place on creativity. I feel I make good use of similes and metaphors to create vivid images for the reader.

Another student takes a more global approach:

> I have primarily learned to express my ideas in a way in which I hope entices people to read what I feel is important to express. Secondly, it is my hope that my style is clear and concise in order for the reader to understand my ideas. Finally, I feel that I am a versatile writer. In trying to attain a liberal arts education, I have attempted to reach beyond my concentrated area of study.

Still another student includes a consideration of genre:

> When writing non-fiction, I always try to discover something that is a little different: an odd angle of evaluation or less obvious thesis--something that will intrigue and challenge, and, perhaps lead me in a previously unseen direction.
>
> When writing fiction, I try to write in the less is more tradition: showing, not telling, and by describing atmospheres and feelings without specifically naming them.

In annotating their writing processes, a number of students follow the pattern established in the cue: "assignment, number of drafts, length of time spent on the writing, and resources used to complete the piece." Other students, however, compose fuller descriptions, showing a more complex sense of writing processes. In the following annotation, a student describes conceptualizing and writing a paper comparing Hilda Doolittle and Georgia O'Keefe:

> The focus of this assignment was to thoroughly research an aspect of 20th century American Literature. I am fascinated with the way in which different forms of art may be inter-related in their sensual appeals and layered meanings, so I chose to compare a poet and a painter who were essentially conveying the same messages through different mediums. I spent five weeks gathering information and just as much time organizing it into a logical thesis and analyzing the often confusing connections in the artists' ideas and their critics' responses. My professor . . . helped me with the organization of my thesis and paper outline. This assignment was definitely a challenge and it gave me a chance to really test my own skills in interpretation and research.

This example provides a good idea of how an annotation can stimulate a reviewer's desire to read a paper.

Most impressive to me as I studied these annotations were those in which the students went beyond anything we overtly requested in the annotation cue. Many students took

the opportunity to articulate their learning. For example, this student describes his learning about course content gained through writing a paper:

> The most important thing that I learned was the difference between the first, second and third world. I had previously held the same misconception that many people hold, that of the differences being solely economical. I now know that it is not economical but politically divided into democracies, communist states and dependents of the previous two.

Another describes her learning in the process of constructing her portfolio.

> Assembling this portfolio proved to be an educational experience for me, in that I had not consciously realized the extent to which my writing had improved over time. Upon arriving at Eckerd, I had no idea how poor my writing skills were. In the process of selecting which papers I would submit, I was stricken with amazement from the discrepancies in the quality I found in them. Upon recognizing such an improvement, I felt overwhelmed by a powerful wave of self-satisfaction.

Finally, in what is my favorite of the portfolios I analyzed for this paper, we see an example of a student developing a writing persona, constructing herself as a subject through her writing, in addition to mediating her writing, analyzing her processes and strengths, and describing her learning:

> This paper is a review of the literature of hostility in personality and health research. It dominated my life for an entire semester. I read day and night. I thought I would never understand the concepts--that I would never really know what a hypothetical construct was, or make any brain connection whatever when authors wrote about opposing operational definitions. It's impossible to estimate how much time it took. How about my

> entire life for that period? I wrote it and rewrote it continuously. The paper may not impress you, or seem to be very much at all, but to me it was like building Hoover Dam with a spoon while working only at night. I never really finished it. At some point it was due, and I had to turn it in. I still read it with emotion. From the ignorance where I started, it's worthy of a Pulitzer Prize.

These are not the voices and rhetorical strategies of the disempowered, alienated, self-effacing student writers that populate so much of writing research. Over and over again in these annotations and in the portfolios they describe, we find students assuming their own authority as writers and actively seeking to influence the way in which their writing will be received. Inviting students to analyze and evaluate their own writing, to present themselves as writers in the way they choose, portfolio assessment is potentially empowering for students.

QUESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1. What correlations exist between the cognitive and rhetorical strategies students display in their annotations and those they employ in their portfolio papers?

2. What differences can we discern between the annotations in passing and non-passing portfolios? What do the differences signify?

3. Can we revise our annotation prompt or the whole portfolio prompt to further empower students and open up new avenues for learning?

4. How are students extending the writing values and cognitive/rhetorical abilities displayed in these annotations into writing in their disciplinary courses?

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